

# Donors shouldn't punish NGOs that disclose misconduct - here's how to help stamp out abuse

By [Angela Crack](#)

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The NGO sexual exploitation and abuse [scandal](#) has grown ever larger, engulfing many other organisations other than Oxfam, including allegations at the [International Red Cross](#), [Médecins Sans Frontières](#), [Save the Children](#) and [Plan International](#). Reports have now emerged of women in Syria being [sexually exploited in exchange](#) for UN aid.



By Kürschner, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

[Heads have rolled](#) at some of these organisations, and it's likely that there will be more resignations and further recrimination.

Priti Patel, the former international development secretary, [claimed](#) she had raised similar issues with Department of International Development (DFID) officials who failed to support her. She warned that the Oxfam case was the “tip of the iceberg”. As a result, there have been [strident calls](#) for greater regulation of the NGO sector.

Sexual exploitation and abuse has long been a problem in humanitarian work – and detailed regulations already exist to address it. Guidelines produced by self-regulatory bodies – run by NGOs to regulate themselves – include the [Core Humanitarian Standard](#), and [tools and resources](#) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Accountability and the Affected Populations and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

But clearly, none of these initiatives seem to have effectively combated the prevalence of abuse in the sector. While these regulatory standards may well need revision, it's far from clear that yet more regulations are the solution.

[Blame has been laid](#) at the door of NGOs for failing to mount a sufficient response to abuse, and quite rightly so. However, the buck doesn't stop there. It's time for some self-reflection at DFID. Its ministers and civil servants, as well as other institutional donors, must consider their part in enabling an environment where sexual exploitation and abuse can flourish.

## When it doesn't pay to speak out

Transparency and [accountability](#) is upheld as a virtue by donors – yet those NGOs that shine a light on misdemeanours are risking their reputations.

During my own [research](#), I spoke to senior staff in leading NGOs, who told me they harbour concerns over the effectiveness of self-regulation within the sector. Some said self-regulation was partly hampered by fear of donor over-reaction to a “less than perfect” report. One told me: “Donors, whether they are private or government, have very little tolerance for being told that somebody has made a mistake. Another said: “We are terrified of fuelling bad publicity which will directly affect our income.”

NGOs should certainly not be exonerated for any failures to be fully transparent, investigate and press any necessary charges against abusers, or ensure there are adequate measures to safeguard those at risk from abuse. But my research has led me to question whether donors – keen to be associated with “good news stories” – have created the impression that the only NGOs that they will fund are those that provide sanitised reports of success.



My sources also pointed out the dangers of a bureaucratic approach to accountability that can be associated with certification mechanisms, relied upon by donors. These can reduce accountability to a tick-box exercise, where practitioners are anxious to document impact and performance to meet reporting requirements. To appease the donor, NGOs may be tempted to adopt tokenistic policies such as complaints boxes, which can be portrayed in reports as evidence of good practice.

In the words of one Oxfam official: “It does risk turning into a paper trail auditing exercise and the actual principles of listening to the people that you’re seeking to serve can get a little bit lost.” Being truly accountable to communities entails a

deep-rooted change in organisational culture. Challenging the mindsets and ingrained prejudices of some staff about what constitutes exploitation and abuse takes time, dialogue and introspection. Donors like measurable outputs. But the activities needed for bringing about cultural change are not easily quantifiable. Not everything that counts can be counted.

So more regulations won't improve the situation. The issue is how donors respond if NGOs disclose wrongdoing.

## A badge of transparency

My sources did not entirely dismiss all self-regulation initiatives, acknowledging some can be an important catalyst for positive change and help the sharing of learning. However, NGOs have been timid in talking to donors about the factors that inhibit the effectiveness of self-regulation within the sector. It's likely that they will be even more wary of engaging in honest conversation given DFID's reaction to the Oxfam scandal: the current minister Penny Morduant [threatened](#) to pull all funding from the charity.

DFID and other donors shouldn't stop pressurising NGOs to do better, but they also need to do more to promote the [way organisations learn](#) from when things go wrong. That includes adopting a positive and constructive attitude towards disclosures of wrongdoing.

It's no secret that aid projects frequently fail and aid workers can commit appalling crimes. The first step towards stopping this is for NGOs to be transparent about transgression. And donors should understand that this is a hallmark of an accountable organisation. They should encourage NGOs to be candid about why failure occurs – which may include listening to explanations that reflect poorly on the donor's preferred way of giving aid.

Some inconvenient truths may need to be shared, and some humility needed on both sides. NGOs that admit failure, that are genuinely contrite and that seek to provide redress to victims of abuse are abiding by accountability norms that donors claim to support. It would be perverse to punish them for doing so by removing their funding, or dragging their reputation into the mud.

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